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U.S. Official Outlines Bush's Meetings With Canadian Leader Says leaders explored ways to deepen security, commercial cooperation

President Bush and Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin explored ways to enhance bilateral cooperation on security and commercial issues in a series of November 30 meetings in Ottawa, according to a U.S. senior administration official.

In a November 30 background briefing, the senior administration official said that during their meetings, the two North American leaders worked to set a strategic vision for U.S.-Canadian relations over the next four years. This vision, he pointed out, includes closer cooperation on both security and trade issues and is the start of a larger North American initiative that will also include Mexico. The senior administration official indicated that the November 30 joint communiqué -- "Common Security, Common Prosperity" -- captures the spirit of the sessions.

One hurdle for closer bilateral cooperation on trade is the challenge of resolving the current U.S. ban on the import of certain Canadian cattle products. The ban has been in place because of concerns about bovine spongiform encephalopathy, also known as BSE or mad cow disease.

The senior administration official said that a U.S. Department of Agriculture proposal that would allow the import of boxed beef and live cattle up to 30 months old without a permit is currently being reviewed by the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Once OMB completes the review, the new regulations can be adopted but, as a major rulemaking, could not become effective until the conclusion of a 60-day congressional review period.

Another trade hurdle is the current bilateral softwood lumber dispute. The senior administration official added that Bush conveyed to his Canadian counterpart that negotiation, not litigation, is the best way to resolve the matter.

"Our point to the Canadians -- and it's not a new point -- is that if they want to continue to pursue issues within the WTO (World Trade Organization), within NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), that's fine, but we're going to protect ourselves in that process," he said. "What they really need to do is get back to the table and negotiate a resolution to the dispute."

As to closer cooperation on security, the senior administration official indicated that President Bush raised the issue with Canadian officials of a missile defense program covering North America. The senior administration official explained that even though participation in a missile defense program is a sovereign question for Canadians to decide, there is a "natural link" between missile defense and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) that has a warning and threat-assessment role. He said that Canada, as part of NORAD, has agreed to participate in the warning and threat-assessment process.

In discussions of the war on terror, the senior administration official pointed out that Canada has played, and continues to play, a very important role in Afghanistan, with about 700 troops on the ground there. As for Iraq, he indicated that Canada agrees that the world is a better place without Saddam Hussein in power, and noted that Canada is actively participating in the reconstruction of Iraq and has committed \$220 million to the effort.

Following is a transcript of the background briefing:

(begin transcript)

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
(Ottawa, Canada)
November 30, 2004

BACKGROUND BRIEFING BY A SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL
ON THE PRESIDENT'S MEETINGS WITH PRIME MINISTER MARTIN

Government Conference Centre
Ottawa, Canada

5:16 P.M. EST

MR. McCORMACK: Hello, everybody. We have a background briefer to talk to you a little bit about the President's meetings today, to offer some -- a general readout of the various discussions that the President had today, and then take a few questions from you guys. So I'll turn it over to our senior administration official.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you. As you know, the President had a chance to meet with Prime Minister Martin and members of his Cabinet today. They met first at Parliament, in the Cabinet Room for about 45 minutes, a meeting largely focused on security and foreign policy and border issues. From there, the President went over to the Foreign Ministry for a working lunch with the Prime Minister, and more ministers -- that lunch largely focused on trade and economic issues. And then they had about a 45-minute one-on-one meeting -- really two-on-two; Dr. Rice and her counterpart, Jonathan Fried, were with the leaders.

And effectively -- you're also aware of the communique that we've released today, the joint communique, Common Security/Common Prosperity. And that document, to a certain extent, captures an important part of this visit, with the idea being to find ways to accentuate and deepen our cooperation on both security and on trade and commerce and economic issues, recognizing that we've accomplished a lot since 9/11, but recognizing that the well-being of our democratic institutions and our prosperity and our open societies still remain at risk and are intimately linked to our security and to our ability to cooperate on security, and that we need to find ways to not only deepen the movement of goods and services across our frontiers, but improve our security while we do that. And what happened today is really a bilateral start for a larger trilateral initiative, really kind of a North American initiative, which will also bring in Mexico. And Prime Minister Martin mentioned that in his remarks to the press. And to a certain extent, what we're doing here is setting a strategic vision, or a positive vision, for the bilateral relationship over the next four years. And this was really the basis around which the discussions took place.

That's kind of a very, kind of macro, 30,000-foot view of the direction of the discussions, but I'm happy to take any questions you have.

Q: Sir, on the question of Canadian beef, Scott McClellan told us earlier today that it now rests at OMB and they have 90 days to address the matter. Do you happen to know when that clock runs out?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't know the exact date. My understanding is that the regulation went from USDA to OMB on the Friday before we went to APEC. We met with Martin in APEC on a Saturday, and the Friday before that the regulation had gone from the Department of Agriculture to OMB. And I think it was formally on OMB's website on that Monday. I'm afraid I don't remember the date, I'll have to work backwards. But there is a 90-day limit. But that's a maximum -- OMB doesn't necessarily have to take those 90 days.

Q: So they could act earlier. And do you -- I know you don't speak for OMB, but do you expect this to be resolved finally with OMB's decision?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, what happens is, OMB is reviewing the rule. Once it completes that review -- assuming that it's a successful review -- it then sends the rule back to USDA for publication. And once that rule is published, since it's considered a major rule, what happens is the rule is then suspended for 60 days because Congress then has a 60-day period to review the rule and, if it wants to, take positive action to stop it from coming and going into place.

Q: So we're months away from a resolution?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, at least a 60-day congressional review period, and then however long it takes at OMB.

Q: Can I just ask, when you say the "rule," could you just tell me what the -- is that an actual proposal for lifting of the ban -- what that rule is, in English?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: In English?

Q: Yes. (Laughter.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's not my specialty. (Laughter.)

Q: What would the rule do? Would it lift the ban?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes. I mean, effectively, right now -- I'm not an agricultural expert, but my understanding is that right now boxed beef or cut beef is allowed to cross the border by permit, but certain other kinds of beef -- for instance, live cattle and other beef products -- are not allowed to cross the border. What my understanding of the rule is, is that it would permit regular commerce in boxed beef and in live cattle up to 30 months of age without permit. In other words, they would --

Q: Cows younger than 30 months --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, cows younger than 30 months. But I would beg you to check with USDA on that description of the rule.

Q: Can I ask why the President raised, unsolicited, the question about missile defense -- continental missile defense, after Ottawa had said any number of times that Washington believed this to be a matter for Canadians to decide, and a sovereign question for Canadians to decide?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, it is a sovereign question for Canadians to decide. But, as you know, missile defense is a broad issue, but there is -- there's a natural link to NORAD because NORAD has a warning and threat-assessment role in larger missile defense. And Canada, as part of NORAD, has agreed to participate in that warning and threat-assessment process. And so, effectively, what the President was trying to do was share his views on missile defense and the importance of missile defense, and recognizing that this is a Canadian decision, but also recognizing that ultimately our missile defense program is going to extend a security umbrella across North America, and that it was important that the Canadians understand his point of view.

Q: So that I can assume from what you said that the President raised the issue with the Prime Minister, it wasn't the other way around?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, yes. It came out of a discussion of NORAD and on the importance of NORAD, taking this threat assessment and warning function, but also looking ahead to when the NORAD -- the NORAD agreement has to be renewed, I believe, in 2006.

Q: Was there any progress that was made on the issue of U.S. tariffs on Canadian softwood? And while the U.S. appeals the WTO decision, what is the state of play there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the softwood lumber issue is one of these eternal issues in the U.S.-Canada relationship. The point of view of the United States -- and this is the point of view that the President expressed to the Prime Minister -- is that this is an issue, ultimately, that needs to be negotiated between the two countries, and that pursuing litigation really doesn't get us where we need to be, which is trying to find a way to break down or establish a dispute resolution process that has the confidence of both sides -- because, again, the problem with litigation is that, you know, you win a case one day, you lose a case another day, and you're not necessarily advancing the goal of finding a long-term solution to the softwood lumber case. So our point to the Canadians -- and it's not a new point -- is that if they want to continue to pursue issues within the WTO, within NAFTA, that's fine, but we're going to protect ourselves in that process, and what they really need to do is get back to the table and negotiate a resolution to the dispute.

Q: -- to not to then appeal the decision of the WTO?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I'll leave that to USTR. I can't make a decision or comment on that further.

Q: Just getting back to the missile defense -- does that mean that the whole missile defense issue will be an integral part of the NORAD negotiation in 2006? How do you see that renegotiation?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I mean, the threat and assessment part will be part of -- but missile defense, broadly, will not be. That sits outside of NORAD.

Q: Can I ask about the Halifax speech tomorrow? Aside from a general "thank you" to Canadians for looking after Americans and others who were grounded here on 9/11, is there a larger message the President is going to be talking about?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The speech at Halifax has a couple purposes. Number one, the President obviously wanted to come to Ottawa, wanted to do his meetings with the Prime Minister and with the Prime Minister's Cabinet, but he also wanted to have an opportunity to visit Canada and also talk to the Canadian people. And Halifax was what we considered a great place to do this for a variety of reasons, most of which you're familiar with. Number one, the Maritime Provinces played a big role in taking in Americans who were stranded following 9/11. There were about 33,000 Americans who were stranded in Canada, the vast majority of them in the Atlantic provinces. Some were stranded, coming in from Asia, in British Columbia. But places like Halifax and Gander and Goose Bay and the rest took a lot of people, and I think Halifax took up to, like, 10,000 people.

And this is an opportunity for the President to go out there and thank Canadians for their kindness and hospitality at a very difficult moment for us in our own nation's history. But Halifax also was kind of the -- the entry point for immigrants coming into Canada. In fact, Pier 21, where the President will be giving his speech, is kind of equivalent to our Ellis Island. But Halifax was also the exit point for all the troop carriers, Canadian troop carriers going to Europe and North Africa during World War II, and to Europe during World War I. So you get this kind of mixture of themes -- security, immigration, and expressions of gratitude to Canada. And it also provides the President an opportunity to speak more broadly about the bilateral relationship, about the common values that we hold, and how those common values really need to be expressed, and how both Canada and the United States work together in the world.

So this is going to be a speech that focuses on thanking the Canadian people, recognizing common values, underscoring the importance of the bilateral relationship, but then he's going to speak very broadly about his vision for the world over the next four years and how Canada can play a role in that.

Q: Could you elaborate on the discussion about Iraq and Afghanistan --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure. Well, on Afghanistan, Canada has played a very important role, and, effectively, the discussion today around Afghanistan was recognizing the important role that Canada has played, recognizing the role that it continues to play, because it still has about 700 troops on the ground in Afghanistan, and the tremendous progress that's been made in Afghanistan, and how, in the President's words -- I think he might have even said this today at the press availability -- how Afghanistan has proven the cynics wrong, and how it has shown that democracy can be created in a country like Afghanistan.

And in regard to Iraq and the larger war on terror, Canada -- whatever disagreements might have existed when we began our military action in Iraq, Canada does, indeed, agree that the world is a better place without Saddam Hussein and does acknowledge and actively participate in the democratic reconstruction of Iraq, and has committed about \$300 million Canadian, which, depending on the exchange rate, is probably about \$220 million U.S. to reconstruction of Iraq, and has agreed to forgive about \$450 million in Iraqi debt. And we're in discussions with Canada about other areas that they might be able to play a useful role in Iraq.

Q: Did the President make any specific case on the training process --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q: Did Secretary Ridge's resignation come up in the meeting between Bush and Martin today? And what kind of challenge does the administration face when you have a department that's just basically three years old, but already you've got a turnover at the highest level?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: In regard to the first part of the question, a large part of the -- the first discussion focused on border security. And Deputy Prime Minister Anne McClellan was a principal during that discussion, and she highlighted just how good the cooperation had been between, first, her predecessor, Manley, and herself, in working on border security issues and how happy the Canadians had been with the progress that they had achieved under Secretary Ridge, and expressed the hope that this progress was going to continue, and the President assured her that it would.

Q: Can you elaborate on any of the challenges that you see the administration would face considering you have turnover within such a brief period of time since the Department was even founded?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, turnover is a normal thing. And I'm not going to comment more broadly on DHS, but I will say that the agenda with Canada is -- has been well-built, both through the Smart Action Accord and the Smart Action Plan, that kind of built underneath the accord, but also with the communique that was released today. We have a pretty well identified agenda of cooperation, and I think that agenda of cooperation is going to continue, whoever is in charge of DHS.

Q: President Bush and Prime Minister Chretien had a somewhat cool relationship. This President puts stock in personal relations with leaders. What would you say these two men have in common or don't have in common as they work on these issues?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I've been in foreign meetings with both leaders, and they have a very good relationship. It's a very easy relationship. They seem to understand each other and I think they both have a lot of respect for each other. There are some similarity in their personal backgrounds -- you know, both come from political families. And so I would just characterize the relationship as one of confidence and openness, which is actually a great thing in these kind of meetings, because it means you can get to important issues and talk about important things.

Q: My question is not on the Canadian relationship, but on your patch by one, Venezuela, and it's just a question about the Chavez arms purchases from Russia, whether or not this is an issue of any concern to the U.S. It seems to be an issue of concern to the Colombians.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It should be an issue of concern to the Venezuelan people. Millions of dollars are going to be spent on Russian weapons for ill-defined purposes.

Q: Can I just follow up? What is your understanding of the purpose of the MiG purchases?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: My understanding is that they're looking to upgrade their fighter fleet, and they've decided that MiGs might be the fighter to purchase.

Q: And that is -- is there a concern for the U.S.?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me put it this way: We shoot down MiGs.

Q: Just to follow up on Iraq. What specific role did the President envision for Canada? Did they talk specifics on that? I know that elections have been one role that's been talked about, and I was wondering what specifics were discussed on that. And then I also had one question on Iran. Are the two of them of the same mind on Iran? Are they in sync pretty much on that issue?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: On Iran, my understanding is that they are pretty much in sync, in terms of concern expressed about proliferation issues in Iran and also about democracy and human rights issues.

In regard to Iraq, the conversation focused largely on what Canada has been doing with the \$220 million U.S. dollars it has put toward reconstruction efforts and the important role it played in agreeing to relieve about \$415 million in Iraqi debt. We are, obviously, interested in other issues, are talking with the Canadians about other ways that they can participate in Iraq. I don't want to go into great detail about that, except to say that obviously elections is one area where Canada, as well as other countries, could play a very meaningful role -- because they've got a lot of experience in monitoring elections, and that they do a good job of it, and it's something that we'd hope they would consider.

5:35 P.M. EST

(end transcript)